

Redesigning Schooling - 6

Engaging parents: why and how

Bill Lucas

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**REDESIGNING
SCHOOLING**
THE CAMPAIGN FOR A SCHOOLS-LED
VISION FOR EDUCATION



Author

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Bill has three children himself and has a long-standing personal and professional interest in family learning. He has written extensively about parenting and parental/family engagement including *Help your child to succeed*, *Happy Families – how to make one, how to keep one*, and *Involving Parents in Schools*.

Bill's latest book, written with Guy Claxton and Ellen Spencer, is *Expansive Education: teaching learners for the real world*. Also with Guy Claxton, Bill is author of *Redesigning Schooling - 2: What kind of teaching for what kind of learning?*

Editors

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SSAT's purpose

SSAT believes that teachers make students' lives. As the world gets more complex, that vital role becomes ever more demanding. As the hub of the largest, longest-standing network of education professionals in England, SSAT exists to help teachers perform their job even better, more confidently and more professionally than before.

This publication

Audience: Education professionals at all stages and settings, and parents

Aims: In this sixth pamphlet in the Redesigning Schooling series, Professor Bill Lucas argues for the wholesale adoption of a strategy of parent and family and community engagement. He also makes the case for far higher levels of awareness among school leaders, teachers, parents and other community members about the kinds of parental engagement that really work - both to raise achievement *and* to develop learners who will thrive in the 21st century. Such activities need to be integral to school strategy, genuinely seen as important by all teachers, and regularly evaluated for their effectiveness.

The pamphlet signposts practical resources, and provides an audit tool to help schools assess current practice and plan future development.

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Chapter 1

A tale of two worlds

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Parental engagement matters to educational performance in the early years and throughout schooling.

*The Confederation of British Industry (CBI)*¹



When parents send their children to school, some breathe a sigh of relief as they entrust their offspring to professional educators. Others, often those who have spent much time and thought selecting their child's school in the first place, sense the start of a shifting of roles. From being their child's only teacher they wonder what it will be like to be part of a team, mum/dad + teacher, and how this new partnership will help their loved one get on in life.

When teachers receive children into their schools they are similarly conflicted. Some set about establishing precisely the kind of shared role just described. Others, quite a considerable number in my experience, secretly breathe their own sigh of relief when the parent has left the

premises and is out of the way. They can now get on with the job of educating the pupil in question.

The result of these actions is that, for a significant number of children, the two worlds of home and school only rarely overlap. At points of transition (recruitment, choosing courses and leaving) the worlds definitely collide, often in a large school hall. Periodically, as the year unfurls, meetings take place to track progress, for example when school reports are issued. Even today it is possible that, as a parent, you will find yourself sitting on a child-sized chair, while the teacher talks to you from a higher position on an adult-sized seat. And if a child is misbehaving or dramatically under-achieving there will inevitably be a summons to come and discuss things.

Joyce Epstein puts this eloquently:

‘The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families. If educators view children simply as *students*, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as *children*, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners in children’s education and development.’²

It need not be a tale of two separate worlds. It is perfectly possible to develop a real partnership between school, child, parent and family – but this requires many meaningful interactions between home and school. A growing number of schools genuinely see those acting in the position of parents as partners and are adapting their practices accordingly.

The evidence for the benefits of a different, deeper, two-way engagement of parents in their children's schooling is strong. Parents (and/or guardians, carers or other family members in some cases) are a major influence on a child's success in life. While the quality of schools and the nature of the child's peer group matter significantly, it is from the home that young people derive lasting effects on their character, mindset and attainment. Parents are, after all, a child's first teacher well before the formal world of education is encountered. And while estimates vary, somewhere between 75% and 85% of a child's waking hours are spent outside the school classroom.

In late 2012 the CBI produced a thoughtful report, *First steps: a new approach for our schools* from which I quote at the start of this chapter.³ In it they made a number of recommendations about the future shape of education, two of which are pertinent to this pamphlet.

The CBI asked, among other things, for the:

- development of a clear, widely-owned and stable statement of the outcome that all schools are asked to deliver. This should go beyond the merely academic, into the behaviours and attitudes schools should foster in everything they do. It should be the basis on which we judge all new policy ideas, schools and the structures we set up to monitor them
- adoption by schools of a strategy for fostering parental engagement and wider community involvement, including links with business.

In *Redesigning Schooling 2 - What kind of teaching for what kind of learning?*, Guy Claxton and I argued strongly for teaching that cultivates in learners a set of pro-social behaviours (kind, generous, tolerant) as well as pro-learning attitudes (resilient, craftsmanlike, collaborative).⁴ These outcomes can provide the answer to the first of the two CBI

recommendations above. Interestingly most parents would strongly endorse them, too. And increasing numbers of teachers, especially those in the Expansive Education Network⁵ adopting approaches such as Building Learning Power⁶ and Habits of Mind⁷, are seeking to cultivate these outcomes both at school and, via parents and families, at home.

This pamphlet builds on the second CBI suggestion and argues for the wholesale adoption of a strategy of parent and family and community engagement. It also makes the case for far higher levels of awareness among school leaders, teachers, parents and other community members about the kinds of parental engagement that really work - both to raise achievement *and* to develop learners who will thrive in the 21st century. Such activities need to be integral to school strategy, genuinely seen as important by all teachers, and regularly evaluated for their effectiveness.

While new models such as free schools may seem to offer parents a much greater role, it is too early to see whether this is merely a brief flush of parent power or something more substantial. In the vast majority of schools the degree to which parents are or are not truly engaged is impossible to ascertain. SSAT's Redesigning Schooling initiative, therefore, comes at a critical moment in England's educational history from this point of view as from many others. It offers all schools the chance to redesign what they do: to stop and think afresh about how they can engage⁸ parents as allies and champions for a new generation of talented, confident and resourceful learners.

Chapter 2

The power of parent and family engagement

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The evidence is consistent, positive and convincing: families have a major influence on children's achievement. When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better at school, stay in school longer and like school more.

Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp⁹



Research into the impact of parental engagement on children and young people is a relatively recent field going back some 30 years. But in this time it has established beyond doubt the many contributions which parents and families can make to the progress of their children.

Figure 1 seeks to capture the essence of this important area of research.

Figure 1 – Impact of parental engagement at a glance¹⁰

1. Impact on student achievement

We know that:

- a) it is what parents do at home that has the most significant impact on children's achievement
- b) when parents engage with schools in their child's learning:
 - achievement increases
 - various pro-learning aspirations and behaviours are enhanced
- c) the effect size of parental engagement is large compared to other factors influencing student achievement
- d) the impact of parental engagement is at its greatest when children are youngest
- e) parental engagement is a significant way of closing the achievement gap between children from poor homes and their more affluent peers.

2. The nature of parental engagement

We have a growing understanding of:

- a) what it is that parents can do to make a difference to their children's learning
- b) what schools can do to encourage and work with parents
- c) how school leaders can best implement strategies that truly engage parents in the learning of their children.

3. What kind of parental engagement for what kind of learning?

We have some emerging thinking and promising practices:

- a) about parenting styles and their outcomes on children
- b) linking desired outcomes of education and different kinds of parental engagement in schools.

In the last few decades there has been a growing recognition across the world of the importance of engaging parents, often in the form of parenting programmes in areas where, for socio-economic reasons, parents have not felt able or willing to be involved in the education of their children. The role of parenting was explicitly acknowledged in legislation in the USA in 2001 (No Child Left Behind Act), and in England and Wales in 2003 (Every Child Matters).

Let's unpack these headline findings in a little more detail.

Impact on student achievement

It was Charles Desforges who first brought the evidence together in the UK to demonstrate compellingly the link between parental engagement and student attainment. To do this he had to disentangle a web of possibly confounding factors affecting a child's performance including:

- his or her characteristics
- the nature of their peers
- the quality of their school
- the characteristics, class and occupations of their parents and family
- the wider neighbourhood in which they live
- the degree to which additional support from other sources is available.

Among many subtle and detailed conclusions, Desforges was clear that parental engagement in the educational development of their children powerfully improves attainment and behaviour:

'Parental engagement in the form of at-home good parenting has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and

adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation.’¹¹

Desforges also encapsulates the way in which parental engagement works:

‘In essence parenting has its influence indirectly through shaping the child’s self-concept as a learner and through setting high aspirations.’¹²

These two quotations exemplify something important about how parental engagement works. While an improvement in attainment may be one outcome of any educational intervention, it is seldom the only one. So, for example, a student’s reading scores might change and at the same time he or she might also have become (a) more confident in selecting reading books, or (b) more dependent on help from a family member, or (c) more likely to keep going with difficult passages of reading; and so forth. The outcomes will depend on the way the parental support is given (just as in the classroom it depends on the way the teaching is done).

But Desforges draws us to a central truth about learning; that it is the outcome of a number of interrelated strands – including beliefs, experiences and skills. With parental engagement, often we find *both* an attainment gain *and* an improvement or a change in some other social or learning behaviour.

In 2005 SSAT, in partnership with the Association of School and College Leaders, initiated the project Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement, (EPRA). It focused on supporting parents to help their children learn, treating parents as learners, better reporting and enhanced pastoral care.

Alma Harris and Janet Goodall reviewed this work and concluded that parental engagement was a powerful way of raising achievement in schools.¹³ They confirmed the earlier Desforges finding that it is what parents do at home that has the most significant impact on achievement. They also identified some continuing challenges, also mentioned by Desforges in his review, such as the fact that the higher the level of a child's attainment, the higher the level of parental engagement (the causation may be in the 'wrong' direction), or that parents seen as 'hard to reach' often perceive schools as 'hard to reach'.

John Hattie has also attempted to analyse just these powerful effects on children. He is clear that the relationship between parental engagement and achievement is strongly bound up with mindset and culture, specifically with parental aspirations and expectations for their children:

'Parents have major effects in terms of the encouragement and expectations that they transmit to their children.'¹⁴

How one school involves parents

Some schools in England already give great attention to involving parents in their children's education, and in the life of the school. Hadley Learning Community, a 3-16 school in Telford, Shropshire, aims to get the relationship with every new family off to the best start possible. Staff make a home visit to each family joining the school at nursery or reception. Seeing the next term's intake first in their homes helps the children to settle in better when the time comes. The staff can see if there are any concerns, and the parents are more comfortable about coming into school if

they have met school staff already, on their own territory. This is particularly valuable with parents who may not have had a good experience in their own schooling.

Before the end of the reception year, children are regularly given 'homework' - little projects they can do with their family. Later, the staff put on workshops for parents who would like practical support in helping their year 6 children at home. Teachers go through the work so parents can see what needs to be done and how they can help. For those with internet access at home, staff also indicate useful websites for getting more information.

The two parent consultation days each year achieve 98-100% attendance from primary parents.

At KS4, student progress is assessed five times a year and detailed information is shared with parents, in addition to the traditional parents' evening and annual written report. The school conducts surgeries, at which parents can raise issues and staff can help them to support their children with homework and revision. These are open to all, and always well attended.

Additional services for those needing them are provided by outside agencies, a number of which have a presence at the school. They include the Team Around the Child (TAC), which works with families that need specific extra support. School staff may go into the home and help the parents, foster-parents or guardians. Staff involved in the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), which covers a child's life from birth to the present, are also available at the school.